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SUBJECT: MUBARAK AND ABBAS BID ADIEU TO CHIRAC

REF: PARIS 1593

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: President Jacques Chirac received Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Paris on April 16, and then met with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on April 17. While both visits were essentially courtesy calls, Chirac seized the opportunity to press Mubarak for support on a Chapter VII resolution on Lebanon; Mubarak was evasive and proposed granting Bashar al-Assad and his relatives immunity in exchange for their acquiescence on the Tribunal's establishment. Mubarak found Chirac pessimistic about the peace process and Iraq. Abbas, in contrast to Mubarak, was enthusiastic about the prospect of direct talks between Israeli PM Olmert and members of the Arab League's follow-up committee. End summary.

Mubarak's Lunch with Chirac

¶2. (C) Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak visited Paris on April 16 to pay a farewell to President Chirac. During a lunch in which most of the conversation was of a personal nature, Chirac pressed Mubarak to lend his support to a Chapter VII UNSCR to establish the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. According to a source at the Elysee, Mubarak demurred (as reported reftel), arguing inter alia that the international community should grant immunity to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his family in exchange for their acquiescence on the Tribunal's establishment. Chirac vehemently disagreed, disputing Mubarak's assessment that Bashar is not in complete control of the SARG and is essentially being manipulated by his inner circle of advisors.

¶3. (C) According to a contact at the Egyptian Embassy, Mubarak found Chirac "very, very pessimistic" about the prospects for Middle East peace. He assessed that Israeli Prime Minister Olmert was "too weak to do anything," either bilaterally with the Palestinians or in response to the Arab Initiative. Mubarak agreed, saying Olmert's offer to meet with Arab leaders was clearly intended to gain de facto recognition from the Saudis at no cost to Israel. Chirac was equally pessimistic about Iraq, and said he expected nothing significant to come either from the Iraq Compact signing ceremony or from the Neighbors' conference. When the conversation turned to Iran, Mubarak expressed his fervent belief that the U.S. desires military conflict with Iran. According to Dominique Boche, Chirac's Middle East advisor, this conviction colored Mubarak's reading of current events. "The Egyptians are searching for evidence to fit their hypothesis," said Boche.

Mubarak's Meeting With Sarkozy

¶4. (C) The day after meeting Chirac, Mubarak met for the first time with leading French presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy. Although officials at the Egyptian Embassy here worried prior to the meeting about the atmospherics between the ambitious, irrepressible Sarkozy and the veteran Egyptian president, they were pleasantly surprised that the two men got along well. "Mubarak seemed to calm him down," an Egyptian diplomat said. In a statement to the press following the meeting, Sarkozy reiterated his private message to Mubarak: He would continue France's "balanced" policy in the Middle East, adding (in a thinly-veiled swipe at Chirac) that Lebanon would not be his sole preoccupation.

¶5. (C) In a colorful aside, on the eve of Mubarak's visit an al-Ahram reporter mistakenly reported that Mubarak planned to meet with all three presidential candidates, a story which led centrist candidate Francois Bayrou to tell the press that he "accepted" the Egyptian president's "invitation." The Egyptian Ambassador immediately called Bayrou's staff to explain that no such invitation existed; protocol dictated that candidates interested in meeting the Egyptian president should ask for an appointment (as Sarkozy did, and as Segolene Royal had done some months earlier). The chastened Bayrou campaign failed to make the request, and so Bayrou did not see Mubarak. According to the Egyptian Embassy here, the al-Ahram reporter who created the confusion was unceremoniously stripped of his presidential press pool credentials.

Abbas Names Ramallah Street for Chirac

PARIS 00001597 002 OF 002

¶6. (C) Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas paid a farewell call to President Chirac on Tuesday, April 17. According to Boche, the meeting between Abbas and Chirac was punctuated by genuine personal warmth, and Chirac was clearly touched to learn that the Palestinian leader had renamed one of Ramallah's principal streets for him. (In a wry acknowledgment that the Israeli public was unlikely to make a similar gesture of affection to the pro-Arab Chirac, Boche joked that if he owned any property on that street, he would hurry to sell it as the street would undoubtedly become one of the IDF's primary targets.)

¶7. (C) The two leaders discussed the state of play on the release of Gilad Shalit (a dual Israeli-French national), and the results of the latest meeting between Abbas and Israeli PM Olmert. Abbas reiterated his request for the resumption of direct EU financial aid to the PA at the earliest opportunity, and said he was en route to Greece, Poland and Bulgaria to see if he could overcome their reticence on that point. Chirac affirmed his support, adding that France will once again try to budge the EU consensus during the GAERC meeting on April 23. Chirac found Abbas supportive of the Arab Initiative, and enthusiastic about the prospect of direct talks between PM Olmert and representatives of the Arab League's follow-up committee.

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